

Bridging Differences - What is happening and how can we engage?

Sermon at Channing Memorial Church, UU by Paula Linn on July 14, 2024

Hello, my name is Paula Linn. I hope you liked the story "I Am Human" I had a difficult time finding anything written for children to go with my topic. I finally found this one recommended in *Tricycle: Buddhist Review Magazine*. I am grateful that this children's book teaches that differences in beliefs and opinions is an important part of being human. I'd like to make accepting differences in beliefs and the idea of listening to find common ground an important part of being a Unitarian Universalist.

The reading "Judge Softly" is also known as "Walk a Mile in His Moccasins" The poem is from 1895 and the author, Mary T. Lathrap was a licensed preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1871, a temperance reformer, and a suffragist. The reading from Monica Guzman's book *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times* is where she defines "bridging conversations" and I would use her book to help **teach so that we may learn** how to have those conversations with the "power to fuel itself and bond its participants."

Let me share a little of my "backstory". I have left Unitarian Universalism twice and come back both times. I first found Unitarian Universalism when I started attending UU Annapolis in 1992 with my husband and pre-school-age son. We became members right away and then resigned two years later. We felt driven away from Unitarian Universalism and that is why I am telling you this story. The reason we felt driven away from UU Annapolis was because there was a very anti-Christian mindset which the then Rev. Fred Muir explained to me as "wounded Christians" making up the majority of congregants.

I found Channing Memorial Church, UU. in September 2003 and then found a job at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia (UUCC) in March 2004. I enjoyed connections at both congregations for 12 years. You many not know that anger and hatred among my UU friends drove me away from Unitarian Universalism altogether in 2016, just months after finally deciding to become a member here at Channing. Anger and even hatred expressed over politics by my UU friends drove me "under a rock" and I stayed away from both CMC and UUCC for three years.

Then in late 2019 anger and hatred **between** my UU friends drove me back to UUCC with the goal of healing the divisiveness. Internal conflict at the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) 2019 General Assembly over the private promotion of *The Gadfly Papers : Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister* by Todd F. Eklof came home and triggered conflict within UUCC.

I do not know the whole story or the details of that harm, because I was still “under a rock”. However, as a former staff leader, I wanted to understand what were the differences that were causing members to leave, key staff to resign, and others to feel betrayed. So I joined “both sides” of the conflict. One side was a pro Fourth Principle Group that formed nationwide and locally and the other was UUCC leadership defending the UUA's actions that some witnesses believed were not in keeping with the Fourth Principle – a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

What I mean by Bridging Differences is hard to explain. I think Bridging Differences is the goal and Bridging Conversations is the tool that Monica Guzman and others teach.

Bridging Differences is NOT conflict resolution:

I learned conflict resolution skills in the business world in my 20s and in the education reform world in my 30s. When conflict drove me back to UUCC, I was late to their conflict resolution process and decided one way I could help was to take the Howard Community College course on Conflict Resolution. The teacher was active in Restorative Justice and taught from several well-written books on the subject.

What I learned from her was that defending my perspective is The Habit to break because it escalates the conflict. Wow! So defending my opinion escalates the conflict. I've lived my whole life defending my views and listening to others defend theirs. I have even joked that if the other (usually my husband) still doesn't agree with me after I explain the first time, I think if I just reword it or reframe it or give more examples **then** they will agree. LOL

Thankfully, my arguments did not escalate into what we think of as conflict. If I had used bridging conversations, on the other hand, I would have noticed where we disagree and asked curious questions to better understand the other's viewpoint. And best case scenario, they would do the same for me. Then better understanding of both sides could lead to discussion of value priorities. So **conflict resolution's goal is resolution**, my professor

taught, by five approaches: avoidance (a favorite), accommodation, competing (or fighting), compromise, or cooperation. **Bridging differences' goal is understanding** and accepting of differences in belief – as expressed so well by the poem “Judge Softly” or “Walk A Mile in His Moccasins”.

UUCC leadership did the best they could with the tools they had.

I believe the UU Church of Silver Spring offered a workshop in March 2020 in response to the General Assembly 2019 conflict. I attended this workshop called “Conflict Transformation in Congregations” representing the Fourth Principle Group at UUCC. It would have been useful if we could have practiced together in class and when we returned to our congregations. But the pandemic put those plans on hold. Sadly I didn't learn about Bridging Conversations from Monica Guzman's book soon enough. Then in 2022-2023 there were UUCC workshops to create various committees on Right Relations including a Conflict Management Ministry. I helped implement that ministry and volunteered to be the contact.

Is it time to add Bridging Differences to our UU World with a formal curriculum and informal practice sessions? How can we start creating tools that fit with our new Values and Covenant that lists **pluralism** as a priority value for Unitarian Universalists. It restates our fourth principle

“We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect”.

I love that! “We embrace our differences with Love, curiosity, and respect.” That is what I've been seeing so many places. We have embraced so many innate differences that we are ready now to embrace our differences of perspective: our search for truth and meaning.

I have learned some tools for bridging and had several opportunities to practice through Braver Angels and their efforts to Bridge the Red/Blue Divide. But what we are experiencing within is NOT a Red/Blue Divide. I believe it is more of a authoritarian versus libertarian divide. In 2019 it was the authority of the UUA versus the liberty of our Fourth Principle. As part of the process to revise our UUA Covenant and Values this past June, we had heated debate nationally over “losing” that Fourth Principle within the value of pluralism. Two amendments would have added additional Values: “Reason and the Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning” and “Peace as a UU Value” but were voted down. Another amendment would have added “Equity calls us to listen, understand, respect, and respond to one another”

but failed to gain enough votes. (according to an article in UU World, 06/23/2024). So there are differences among us still.

Monica Guzman published her book *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times* in 2022 and I've been looking for people to help me implement her bridging tools ever since. Some of you have shown interest and I haven't gotten back to you until now. Now the time is right! There are so many resources out there that I want to tell you about them all, but I will save that for when we get together to create a course for UUs everywhere if things go well :-). Then with a course to offer, we can teach the methods and then practice them in our safe, loving community. And then take our skills and tools out into our places of differences such as our personal relationships with friends and family, and social justice projects.

I believe Unitarian Universalists are the best population of people to further this movement because of our history of bridging differences in beliefs based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and other innate differences. We know how “sorting and othering” based on these differences hurts. We know how “othering” can lead to dehumanizing, which can lead to violence. We have been historically courageous enough to express our differences in belief under challenging times. We are not limited by the authority of church dogma. We are also aware more now than ever, that our beliefs can be associated with political polarization, which then can cause division within our friendships and family. I have had conversations with some of you about these personal divisions and know we all would benefit from tools to bridge that.

And I believe that Centering on Love instead of our previous center around democratic principles means listening to the other side, looking for understanding, and finding common value priorities. I want to believe that Bridging will bring more young people into Unitarian Universalism, if not on Sunday, then everyday that they use Bridging tools that they learned from our materials, our workshops, and our offerings of every kind. We can provide a safe place to practice bridging conversations. We have provided a safe place to express all our innate differences and this is the next step.

Just last Sunday, the new UUCC board president, Laurie Coltri, asked me how the Conflict Management Ministry was going and I told her my theory of why no one has come forward to resolve conflict. I think conflict management has a negative image and UUs want to help

others, not ask for help for themselves. I suggested we reframe the Conflict Management Ministry as a Bridging Differences Training opportunity. If we learn how to bridge our differences, we can prevent conflict as the negative experience we associate with the word. We can use the training in our congregations, at home, with friends, and in the larger community. There are possibly five people at UUCC interested in this project. Please let me know in person or by email if you would like to be part of this project. I believe there are others in local congregations who will be interested as well.

The challenge will be getting people to sign up to practice disagreement! I have some ideas on where to go to find people who disagree. I'm sure you do, too. Courageous Conversations in Howard County was a good way to offer insight into race and religious differences, but I noticed there was no disagreement to bridge. Everyone who signed up for Courageous Conversations was already open-minded to the differences.

Let me end with just a small sample of what the Bridging Differences Movement includes:

“Governor Moore Joins National Governors Association ‘**Disagree Better**’ Initiative” (press release on his website, dated 2/5/2024)

Greater Good Science Center at University of California, Berkeley has a **Bridging Differences Program**, a free online course, and an email newsletter.

“**Bridge USA – The Youth Movement for Better Politics** - Join the Fight Against Political Division” a group facilitating youth groups at the college and now high school level.

Most of these resources are focused on political polarization, but I believe the tools for bridging can be tailored for use in social justice projects as well as in our personal conversations. That is why I would begin with taking the UUA Ethics course “What We Choose: Ethics for Unitarian Universalists” which some of us took in June 2014 with Rev. Susan La Mar. That course is available on the UUA website and would be an excellent place to start by revising HOW we teach it with time to practice bridging conversations.

If you disagree with anything I've said, please let me know and we'll have a Bridging Conversation about it.